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Interviews

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The Best of All Possible Ends of the World: An Interview with Andrew Culp

Josef Thorne

ABSTRACT *Dark Deleuze* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016) appears as an anomaly in English Deleuze scholarship. Andrew Culp contrasts Deleuze as a thinker of positivity who constantly demands we find "reasons to believe in this world" with a Deleuze of dark negativity. In doing so, Culp offers an alternative Deleuze in a time where powerful forces from Buzzfeed to the IDF seek to appropriate Deleuze's thought. The Dark Deleuze speaks of destructive negativity, hatred for this world, and the shame of being human. All of these ideas are pit against "the canon of joy" that would have us relentlessly celebrate the new, affirm the present, and give in to compulsory positivity. Culp makes a powerful case that, contrary to what one might expect, it is precisely the positivity that lies at the heart of both liberal and accelerationist readings of Deleuze.

Dark Deleuze (University of Minnesota Press, 2016) appears as an anomaly in English Deleuze scholarship. Andrew Culp contrasts Deleuze as a thinker of positivity who constantly demands we find "reasons to believe in this world" with a Deleuze of dark negativity. Such darkness has been suppressed not merely by readers of Deleuze but even by the philosopher himself. *Dark Deleuze* is relentless in its attempt to separate politics and ontology. In doing so, Culp offers an alternative Deleuze in a time where powerful forces from Buzzfeed to the IDF seek to appropriate Deleuze's thought. *Dark Deleuze* is true to the Deleuzian dialectic of fidelity and betrayal precisely in how it betrays the master. Culp does nothing less than attempt to think behind Deleuze by making him give birth to a monstrous child. The Dark Deleuze speaks of destructive negativity, hatred for this world, and the shame of being human. All of these ideas are pit against "the canon of joy" that would have us relentlessly celebrate the new, affirm the present, and give in to compulsory positivity. Culp makes a powerful case that, contrary to what one might expect, it is precisely the positivity that lies at the heart of both liberal and accelerationist readings of Deleuze.

Initial Questions

In Dark Deleuze, you suggest that after the death of God and the death of Man there is a third death, the death of This World. How does the death of this world affect political practice? How would revolutionaries espousing this idea act differently from those who currently exist?

Most people introduce the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari through the events of May '68 in France. The year 1968 is itself one of those important years of revolution... 1789, 1848, 1917. And as Antonio Negri has said in an interview, "in the nineteenth century France did politics and Germany did metaphysics, in the twentieth century France did metaphysics and Italy did politics."¹ It is therefore easy to see why *Anti-Oedipus* is usually regarded as a book-of-that-moment.

The Dark Deleuze project takes a different year of revolution as its point of departure: 1989. Most only think of it as the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, but 1988/1989 marked the first mass economic summit protests in Berlin and Paris. Just a couple years later, the first commercial Internet Service Providers came online. This period coincides with the political uptake of Deleuze and Guattari in North America. (Parenthetically, I should add that there were other versions before that, namely “schizo-culture” which is way too acid for my taste.) The D&G of anti-globalization emphasized the importance of the rhizome, as seen in its many names: “the movement of movements,” “a global network,” “a world where many worlds are possible.” This is really when the notion of “think global, act local” solidified, and there were a number of global convergences that fused into “alter-globalization” that is also called “the global justice movement.” These characterizations never completely sat right with me—the World Social Forum and other attempts to do “globalization from below” still seemed too tied to liberal democratic notions of global governance, populist socialist principles of people power, and a rather dull interpretation of communism.

My project is inspired by another current that flows through the anti-globalization period: left-communism and so-called nihilist anarchism. Moreover, it is an intellectual trajectory that takes a distance from its prehistory, which goes back at least to the 19th and early 20th century. There’s already plenty of ink on those heretical communists, Max Stirner, and non-soviet political experiments. For me, there is clearly an epistemological break in the mid-20th century that coincides with the New Left, Situationism, Post-Structuralism, Autonomia, and other movements that step outside of the long shadow cast by organization and will. It is the radical thought/practice that emerges from this break that interests me the most. So a key reference point is Fredy Perelman and Red and Black Press, who promoted a unique intersection of Situationist, left-communist, and insurrectionary anarchist materials that make up a lesser-known current of American anarchism. Other references in that mix include *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, Jacques Camatte, Gilles Dauvé, Tiqqun, and Claire Fontaine. Furthermore, while I enjoy speaking to others who know the older history of council communism, philosophical debates among the Young Hegelians, or other historical material, I think the last few decades have been innovative enough to keep us from paying our dues to old white movements that largely failed.

With that being said, what does this look like on the practical level?

Practice? A lot depends on the question of how to fight from where you stand. Broadly, I think Dark Deleuze turns away from both mass movement building and Leninist notions of politics. In other places I’ve spoken about “the shadow of Lenin,” namely the primacy of organization in social change, the role of blueprinting models for a new society, and the need for vanguardist leadership to promote education/discipline. I am not trying to be unfair to the legacy of Lenin, who managed to do something far grander than us. Yet I think that radical politics is stuck in a fundamentally sociological mode. This is why so many anti-Leninists are still trapped in his shadow, such as anarcho-syndicalists who think that democratic process is the solution to our political ills. Maybe I am just rehashing the Foucault-Chomsky debate here! So as Baudrillard once suggested we “forget Foucault,” my proposition is to “forget Lenin” and the sociological dimension of politics that his approach implies.

On a more personal level, I have also shifted to thinking of myself as a lifer. The consequences are pretty significant. I now embrace our insignificance in the grand scheme of things, have jettisoned moralist/guilt-based politics, and now prefer to work with like-minded folks. Believing in your own insignificance seems integral for managing the libidinal economy of participation. The emotional politics of urgency-relief that drive most

people to feel good simply for “doing something” like marching at a rally is the drug of choice for most community organizers. Early on, it can be easy to get hooked on the emotional rollercoaster. But if you stick around long enough, it is important to get wise. The same can be said about moralist politics. The added caveat being that call-out culture has the same basic dynamics of war communism, which makes it as equally unsustainable. The question of working with like-minded people is a thorny one. Briefly, I do not believe in mass movement building. Yet I also do not like lifeboat politics that only works for the benefit of me-and-mine. As you know, there is a body of literature on “the politics of friendship,” including Derrida’s critique of the friendship that philosophy inherits from the Greeks as patriarchal. I have personally tried to think through the problematic through a quote from Guattari, who when writing about his relationship to Deleuze, once said that “Gilles is my friend, not my buddy.”

Specific practices always seem to ebb and flow. I still reflect on the 2008–2011 “insurrectionary” period in North America/Europe. The queer group Bash Back! was a high point, and their history was chronicled in a wonderful anthology titled *Queer Ultraviolence*. The Invisible Committee approach of starting land projects (which goes by the name “Tiqqunism” in North America) has been popular for the last five years. I have my reservations, but the strategic genius of it is undeniable: by inhabiting the material conditions closer to that of a peasant than a biopolitical citizen, one’s self-subsistence makes large structures of power (such as the state) easier to desert. Very recently, the transformation of black bloc into antifa has been interesting. It does not form the same coherent strategy that the black bloc does, but it is at least amusing to see the far right echo chambers slap the antifa label on everything they dislike.

I’ve noticed in your work that you spend a great deal of time rallying against the intrusions of liberalism into Marxism and more specifically Deleuzianism. How can critiques of capitalism become liberal? Is it because of productivism? What exactly is it that separates the liberal from the non-liberal Deleuze?

Us Marxists often find ourselves quibbling most with friends who have fallen for the lure of liberalism. This risk is only intensified with Deleuzians, as many of them are self-professed liberals. The translator of *Difference and Repetition* and author of *Deleuze and the Political* is currently fusing together Deleuze and Rawls. William Connolly, one of the most prolific American political theorists, routinely uses Deleuze in support of his “radical liberalism” and in opposition to revolution. One of his former students, Nicholas Tampio just came out with a book premised on reading Deleuze against his Marxism in favor of “cutting-edge liberalism.”

There’s a reason this conflict of interpretation exists. Defined for so long as the thinker of difference, Deleuze appears to stand at the crossroads of Marxism and liberalism. Some thinkers even argue that Deleuze eliminates the forced choice between the two schools of thought. The image of this argument usually goes as such: the problem with capitalism is not that it is too liberal, but rather, not liberal enough. In form, it is a dialectical variation on the old stagist argument that communism comes into existence by following the historical transition of feudalism into capitalism into socialism into communism. The liberals agree that capitalism rides on the coattails of the bourgeois revolution. Yet they place a liberal version of social democracy at the end of the sequence. A curious conclusion given that the liberal concept of selfhood is premised on property ownership (“possessive individualism”) that most Marxists intend to abolish along with the capitalism.

More abstractly, the “liberal Marxist” interpretation of Deleuze tracks back to the modernist aspiration for novelty, creativity, and the production of the new. Like Marx and

Engels say in *The Communist Manifesto*, capitalism initiates unparalleled revolutionary change (tearing asunder sedimented social codes, melting everything solid into air) but unfortunately this revolutionary potential is geared exclusively toward privatizing its products in the hands of the few. Liberalism rears its head with how this state of affairs is critiqued. What is wrong with capitalism? If you think capitalism causes rootlessness, you are probably a neo-traditionalist. If you think capitalism divides us, you are most likely a brocialist. And if you think capitalism is wasteful, you could be a liberal Marxist. Just look at the Keynesian Marxism of Sweezy and Baran in *Monopoly Capitalism*, the Maoist focus on the “productive forces” evolving past capitalism’s fetters, and other productivist accounts (sometimes including New Materialism, to the extent that it remains Marxist). Each are different logical conclusions of the modernist fixation on the production of the new. We can then summarize “liberal Marxists” as those who believe that capitalism is not creative enough.

Where does your work stand in relation to [Isabelle] Stenger’s Cosmopolitics (2010)? You spoke positively of her and her project in one of your talks available on the internet, but you have spoken negatively of people like Latour in some of your interviews.

Stengers is a fellow traveler. She is an impeccable commentator and does really incisive intellectual history. Her position on capitalism is always critical; see, for instance, *Capitalist Sorcery* (2011, with Philippe Pignarre) or *In Catastrophic Times* (2015). So regardless of whatever objections I may have, any disagreement is a friendly one. But like most Deleuzians, she does not always shed the modernist prejudice for the new. *Cosmopolitics* is one strong instance of it. Her political commitment to the production of the new is unsurprising, as most of us first read her through her collaboration with Ilya Prigogine, *Order out of Chaos* (1994), which was an essential reference for those who built a politics out of the science of self-organizing systems. But as I have said elsewhere, politics arises in between metaphysics and normativity. We must avoid both pure metaphysicians who remain willfully ignorant to consequences and trend-chasers who confuse metaphysics for politics. A really succinct statement on the question was penned by Christian Thorne in “To the Political Ontologists,” which really puts the screws to the recent ontologists, materialists, and realists.

Maurizio Lazzarato created a formulation that may evade the creativity-ontology issue that plagues many Deleuzians in “Capital-Labour/Capital-Life,” the English translation of a chapter from his major work *Les révolutions du capitalisme* (2004). In it, he uses *Difference and Repetition* to argue that capitalism is a secondary action of capture that is a dull repetition of the same. It echoes one of the important insights of the Capture plateau in *A Thousand Plateaus*, namely that economic modes of production do not define all societies, rather, it takes the state to make production a mode. But maybe Lazzarato’s formulation is not yet de-modernized enough?

My ultimate assessment of Stengers is that given her brilliant work on metaphysics, such as her work on Whitehead, her significant oeuvre exceeds any of the political limitations of liberal Marxism. An example: her work on Gaia was very important to developing my own thoughts on the Anthropocene.

In a similar vein to the above, how does your work relate to [Manuel] DeLanda’s? The points where you discuss him were tantalizingly brief. It seems you have a negative opinion of him overall, but to what extent do you disagree with his reading? You claimed he often oversimplifies Deleuze’s concepts, and his abandonment of Marxism is another point of contention. Are his books like Nonlinear History wrong or simply naive?

DeLanda is interesting. He is many people’s gateway into Deleuze, and for that, the lucidity of his concrete examples are heartily appreciated. Yet his method is his problem.

Deleuze moves from the abstract to the concrete, beginning with Virtual Ideas (also known as abstract machines) as what structures the real. This is philosophy as defined by him and Guattari in *What is Philosophy?*, the infinite speed of thought that is not caught up in slowness of any concrete state of affairs. DeLanda's method is the opposite; he always moves from the concrete to the abstract. In that sense, he is a crude materialist who actively denies the power of philosophy. The most significant consequence for me is that he empties out the space of politics.

In more philosophical terms, DeLanda is guilty of the same crime as most social theorists: by placing ontology before politics, he allows his own image of "what is" to foreclose the utopian dimension of politics that provokes radical transformation. Take for example his *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (1997). The book is a dangerously persuasive tracking of how small changes accrete over time. On a banal level, it feeds into the molecular story of politics loved by Deleuzian liberals: that the small victories of incrementalism are even more decisive than those who demand wholesale change. His work has even been used by the pesky "realists" who pour cold water on us by saying we need to learn more about how the system works before trying to change it, or that we are asking for too much, too fast. In a grander sense, what is lost is the whole role of the virtual and its relationship to the future as a force driven by the great unknown. So in Deleuzian terms, he only retrospectively acknowledges lines of flight because he only values them for their ability to be reterritorialized. He has even said as much in interviews: what he offers is "Deleuze for re-territorializers."

In a similar vein to question one, how does an escapist politics differ significantly from accelerationism, both of Land's type and Srincek's? Nick Land seems to proscribe dissolution and atomization of social and political entities, while you claim to advocate disruption. Land's ideal world is a Nozickian meta-utopia in a cyberpunk coat of paint, but what does the endgame of world-destruction look like, in practical terms, what does "blasting off with Sun Ra"—to paraphrase one of your other interviews—look like?

I abandoned an essay on Nick Land a few months ago, feeling that his ideas have gotten far more exposure than they deserve. This will probably be the last time I will mention him before no-platforming him. There are some useful kernels in Land's work during the Cybernetic Cultures Research Unit he headed up at Warwick in the 1990s; he has turned into something worse than a fascist. I would not discourage anyone from reading his monograph on Bataille, *Thirst for Annihilation* (1990), or any of the essays collected in *Fanged Noumena* (2011). Though I could not recommend either in good conscience without adding the caveat that they could be a roadmap to hyper-conservative thought.

If we step back from any one argument, Land is clearly a case study in paranoia-become-text. He carries with many demons that do not really exist. And for the ones that do, he affords them far greater weight than they truly hold. His two favorite conspiracies are the academy and technology. Yes, he was drummed out of the university. But he was kicked out for acting like an antisocial fool, not intellectual blasphemy. If anything, the university unfortunately had *more* tolerance for his behavior than nearly any other type of workplace. Sure, universities have become more aggressive in enforcing their drug-free and sexual harassment policies. That hardly means that "The Cathedral" controls the globe through ideological programming. The great irony is how little influence academia really has on the world – my students are far more inculcated in popular culture than any discourse I introduce to them. Alternatively, let us consider his techno anti-humanism. Are computers cold, dead machines trying to kill humanity as we know it? Nah. And I am perplexed at him laying this notion at the feet of Deleuze and Guattari. For those somehow not familiar with [Donna] Haraway's cyborg manifesto, it is clear that D&G don't

believe in some outdated natural/synthetic dichotomy. In fact, one of the foundational claims of D&G's take on technology is that machines are social before they are technical.

In summary, the hermeneutic key to understanding all of Land is that he has the persecution complex of a narcissist. He wants nothing more than to be The Bad Guy. His willingness to switch political sides has nothing to do with embracing darkness in an extramoral sense. He will do anything to remain the center of attention. That is why he trucks in fringe theories. This makes him more a psychoanalytic subject pathologically fixated on transgressing The Law, not some dark saint of materialism.

My own thoughts on escape are a reconfiguration of "the line of flight." My dissertation, which I titled *Escape*, was an attempt to change how we think about line of flight. The concept has long been thought of as a literary/creative flight of fancy, transversal connections between social groups, or line of subjective becoming. I remain faithful to the concepts in the Capture plateau and the anthropology chapter of *Anti-Oedipus*. In both, the line of flight is the means through which one social form transforms into another. "Capture" is the means through which states control lines of flight. This latter point is so important to D&G that they argue that societies should not be categorized according to their mode of production but their mode of prevention (here we find an interesting coincidence with [Alain] Badiou's concept of the event as a prevent). The task of escape is then about finding the lines of force that force a social form into decomposition.

The "end of the world" is both philosophically important but also a cognitive map of popular conceptions about revolution. A hundred years ago, revolution was represented through anxieties over the death of god as explored through Modernism. Now we have apocalyptic tales. The interesting thing is that most of the stories take place after the apocalypse. What we can take from this is that the end of the world does not mean that everything ends, but rather, everything changes. Yet the disappointing thing about most apocalyptic fiction is about how little changes. So as Fredric Jameson has argued, in popular culture, it is easier to imagine an end of the world than the end of capitalism. The characters wander barren lands wrought by environmental catastrophe yet key tenets of capitalism remain, whether they be private property, wage-labor, the class-relation, or something else. Worst of all, most of them are thought experiments in what undergirds society, the necessities that cannot be jettison when we can no longer afford the wasteful luxuries of art, pacifism, anti-racism, women's lib, or other things that have defined the New Left. Part of the project of thinking the end of the world is using the contemporary raw material of thinking revolution, apocalyptic fictions, to write new apocalypses that are more to our liking. This is where Sun Ra's afro-futurism comes into play. Consider his film *The Space of the Place* (1974)—it would be easy to mistake Ra's cosmic perspective as offering a survey of space as a solution, yet the heart of the dramatic conflict is over how best to destroy the Earth. In this case, it is neither the journey nor the destination that matters in the end.

Philosophically, each of the three deaths I mention match each of Kant's three critiques. I haven't worked through this as much as Gregg Flaxman, who covers the in the conclusion ("Sci-Phi") to his excellent book *Gilles Deleuze and the Fabulation of Philosophy*.

Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams are fellow travelers, so I do not want to spend a lot of time criticizing them. But one thing is clear: they do not strike me as very Deleuzian. They are far more Latourian in how they map social systems and imagine the role of science in society. I bet there are things about Latour that can be saved, though I have been put off by his strong third-way centrism. It seems that the most radical he gets is United Nations initiatives. So Srnicek and Williams are certainly to the left of that. But they are not terribly committed readers of Marx, leaving out conversations about the dialectical

nature of the organic composition of labor or even more serious Marxist management literature at the intersection of technology and manufacturing, making their whole take on automation rather surface. Their prescriptions are futurology that read a lot like Richard Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, a speculative novel that imagined full automation in the year 2000. I would think my greatest political disagreement with them is over something I have with nearly all democratic socialists: the state. On the question of the state, Deleuze and Guattari are quite unambiguous, it is an enemy of the highest degree.

Is there room for a positive program, or an application of the canon of joy after Dark Deleuze has had his way? Does positivity and creativeness have a place in Dark Deleuze at all? If so, what happens after we end the world?

That's the question. I come from an anti-organizational, anti-programmatic anarchist tradition, so not that! There are plenty of people who suggested to me, with a wink and a nudge, "it's really a mix of the Dark and the Joyous that you want in the end, right?" I would rather not give them the satisfaction. In *Dark Deleuze*, I mean it when I say that the dark and the joyous are contrasts, forks in the road, alternatives. I genuinely hope we replace the joyous with the dark. Positivity and creativity do not need to be denounced, but I think they should no longer serve as motivating ideas.

After the end of the world? Well, for me: the end of capitalism is tied to the coming of communism. By that, I mean the abolition [of] private property, work, and all of the intolerable forms of oppression it enables (patriarchy, racism, ableism).

Conversations

It is definitely true that creativity and positivity for themselves have to be tossed out. Whitehead's creativity suffers a similar fate as Deleuze and Guattari's autoproduction. There are many who take novelty and treat it as if it is a good thing in itself, but the advance into novelty is just a state of affairs we can't do away with, not something good or bad.

Many people express this issue through the phrase "confusing ontology for politics." This is especially an issue for Deleuze, as his use of Spinoza often blurs the line between an account of what is and a judgment on what is good. There is a rather flat-footed reading of Deleuze's Spinozism whereby any collection of things that come together into an assemblage is a joyous encounter of bodies—everything else is just sad passions. There is even a funny way of reading the Geology of Morals plateau this way. So absurd! Those who read it this way just need to continue a few plateaus later to find Deleuze and Guattari railing against molar segmentarities and megamachines, arguing that large collections are fascist. I lay some of the blame at the feet of the "post-critical" turn in which some theorists have suggested that critique has failed and all we have left is constructivism. Latour is at the forefront of this. Perhaps this is why Deleuze and Guattari have to follow up *A Thousand Plateaus* with *What is Philosophy?* which promotes a definition of philosophy that exceeds a state of affairs. Though we were already told about this at the end of the Rhizome plateau, when they declare an end to ontology.

I suppose what I was getting at is that after the world has ended, at that point wouldn't that be when positivity comes in as something non-compulsory? Once we do away with our oppression with radical negativity aren't we allowed to breathe some fresh air and listen to Zarathustra? Or is constant negativity necessary to stave off the dreaded Buzzfeed Deleuze?

The key to my understanding of positivity is this: Deleuze has a positive metaphysics but it need not imply a positive politics. For Deleuze, there is no anti-matter, only the positive

exists, e.g. when making art, no matter if you are James Terrell making light art or Jun'ichirō Tanizaki in *In Praise of Shadows*, you have to make something rather than nothing. Problems arise when people take positivity as a political principle. That's how we get the self-help Nietzsche, the Lego Spinoza, the BuzzFeed Deleuze. I find negativity through the intolerable: those things that disarm us of all our ability to overcome them, where the only faculty we have left is our capacity to think. Philosophy is the re-posing of problems in a different way so that a new set of solutions appear.

“The world” is philosophically the result of Kant's third critique. He thinks that knowledge arrives from “the world.” I say that this is our current horizon of thought – all of that worldly thinking has us in a state of exhaustion. Climate change being the most dramatic example. In the philosophical sense, then we move from knowledge coming from god, man, or the world to something else. I certainly don't want to suggestion that we should all live in a constant state of ennui. But yes, the role of thought is to change our whole orientation, and I think that it should continue without end.

Notes

1. Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, “It's A Powerful Life: A Conversation on Contemporary Philosophy,” *Cultural Critique* 57 (2004): 154. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)

Josef Thorne

Josef Thorne is an autodidact primarily interested in A.N Whitehead, Deleuze, and Sloterdijk.



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